Raising Funds for Special Projects

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The best fundraising principles and practices can be adapted to many types of fundraising campaigns. The principles addressed in chapters one through five of this volume are valid for a variety of fundraising efforts, whether long-term sustainability or a one-time project. However, those who are leading out in fundraising, serving on fundraising committees, or attempting to raise funds for something specific may need a little extra help in how to use the general principles and apply them to a project fundraising campaign.

The advice in this chapter intends to help the reader determine how to do short-term fundraising, have a plan for a specific goal, use the best tools and strategies, and avoid "the bake sale" mentality. Too often people will start by saying, "I heard an organization across town raised a TON of money hosting a golf tournament. Let's do a golf tournament, too." Or, "My alma mater went over goal by doing a phonathon. Let's do a phonathon!" without taking the necessary planning steps first. While these projects aren't necessarily doomed to fail, it often leads to a more difficult and drawn out fundraising process, and often these haphazard efforts aren't successful in reaching the goal.

We encourage you to first read chapters one through five, then consider the suggestions that follow.

Planning

Consider using the following steps as suggested guidelines, recognizing the details and specific order (as many steps may happen concurrently) can vary for your organization.

1. Include key individuals from the beginning. Make sure all key leaders understand this project and how it will support the overall mission of the organization. Identify and engage the key influencers within your organization's membership or major potential donors. These individuals are important in the success of this campaign and project and deserve to be involved in the planning process.

2. It's important to ask the question "Why are we doing this?" Or "What objective(s), as they fit our mission, are we trying to accomplish?" The answer to this question should be thoroughly vetted and the conclusions clear and agreed upon prior to the beginning of any fundraising campaign.

3. Determine the exact scope and expense of the project. Clearly articulate what it is you wish to acquire or do and why it matters. What about the sustainability of this program? Do you anticipate an ongoing expense and how will that be funded? Equally important is the discussion of what this project will NOT include. Don't allow "project creep" to diminish or distract from the focus of your project or create a fundraising campaign that is unrealistic in view of time, financial or human constraints. Rejecting an additional project does not mean it must be shelved forever. Remember, donors will be more likely to give again after they've had a positive experience giving the first time.

4. Establish a framework for your fundraising activities. While it is not necessary to develop a fully operating development office for your project, certain processes will need to be in place before your efforts can begin. Who at the organization is authorized to receive and write receipts for gifts? How will gifts-in-kind be handled? Does the organization have a process in place to ensure gifts are directed specifically to this special project? Once a gift is received, how will you thank your donors? If you plan to accept pledges, who will be responsible to send pledge reminders? These and many other questions will need to be answered. While much of this may already be in place, it is important that you and your fundraising team know the existing policies and procedures to avoid potential confusion, misdirection of funds and donor confusion, or actually neglecting to carry out many infrastructure details and tasks.

5. Determine how you will identify your donors. Of course the inner circle, or the "family," must give. This means the board, the members, and the students, who might be involved in several ways. These donor groups are important to activate because if the "family" doesn't give generously, it's inadvisable to ask anyone else. After these groups are involved, consider who else has a link to the project and the organization. This could be places where people work, friends, businesses in the community for whom you are an economic benefit, perhaps even a foundation. Be realistic on why these potential donors would and could give, and avoid wishful thinking.

6. As a team, then determine which fundraising tools you will utilize to reach your goal and appropriately invite the donors you identified to give. While examining what's been done in the past and analyzing the successes of similar organizations can be useful, it should only be a part of the overall planning. Evaluate honestly the resources you have available to you. Do you have the money and database to support a letter writing campaign? Do you have a team of volunteers willing to launch an aggressive major gifts outreach? Would this project appeal to a foundation and do you have a volunteer capable of writing a grant proposal? Carefully evaluate each tool available to you as well as the associated expenses, training and time involved. Additionally, don't overlook donor preference. Have your donors expressed a preference for giving through events?

7. Establish a formal written fundraising plan and submit it to the organizational leader. This plan should include all activities related to this project including

fundraising, donor cultivation, thanking, awareness-raising, and of course budget. While there is no ONE correct format each organization should follow, there are a few items each plan should include to guarantee success:

   a. First, each plan must be as detailed as possible. It's not enough to just say "send direct mail letter." It must include steps such as securing office stationery, writing drafts and receiving approvals, and date final draft is printed.

   b. Each task must have a name assigned to it. It does not mean this person is solely responsible for accomplishing the entire task, but it does state who is in charge of getting it done.

   c. Each task must have a "Complete By" date. "Ongoing" or "Monthly" won't be nearly as effective as an actual, firm date.

8. As part of this process, make sure everyone knows your expectations in advance. Consider writing a brief job description for all committee members. Establish regular meetings. These need not be at definite intervals but frequent communication should occur and occasional face-to-face meetings may be important to ensure accountability.

9. Having determined which tools will be utilized and by whom, empower your team by ensuring adequate training or resource materials are available, especially those who may be asked to step outside their comfort zones by taking leadership roles or asking individuals or businesses for large gifts in a face-to-face setting.

Fundraising

For most organizations, utilizing several fundraising tools will produce the best results. Your program might include:

1. Major Gift solicitation – often this is the most intimidating and nerve-wracking aspect of fundraising; but it can also be the most rewarding. And it's almost always the most effective and least expensive. Think about your current and potential donors. Who within your organization might be interested in this project and why, and who outside of the organization would give and why.

2. Writing campaign – whether through e-mails, postcards or traditional approaches, letter-writing campaigns are popular approaches in some organizations, who will then likely have large and accurate databases. While this can be an effective tool, remember the associated cost involved in postage, stationery, printing of additional materials, and labor.

3. Events – events, when planned strategically, can be a great fundraising tool. Events can raise awareness, generate excitement for the project, introduce you to new potential donors and provide a showcase opportunity for your campaign. However, if your only (or primary) goal is to raise money, you may want to consider a different tool. Events can be extremely labor and cost intensive and rarely have the kind of

return on investment as other approaches. They may be good for creating awareness and encouraging involvement, but keep a realistic perspective. Have a concrete purpose in mind.

4. Sales – we are often most comfortable with this approach (giving a tangible item in exchange for a donation). While this has its appeal, there are some drawbacks to consider when contemplating "just selling something." The greatest challenge is that it does not share the mission of the organization or what you're trying to accomplish. Cookie dough sales won't inspire donors with the importance of your project and will create a customer/seller relationship rather than that of an investor in the project, one who has a vested interest. Additionally, like events, it's rare that selling items will generate large gifts and often they are quite labor intensive.

Again, it will be important for you as a fundraising team to regroup occasionally, evaluate performance against expectations and make modifications when necessary. This fundraising process should not be a long, drawn out effort with no clear timeline. Make sure you are realistic in your timeline, but a sense of some urgency can be motivating not just to potential donors but also to a team of fundraising volunteers. And there should be a clear timeline—when do you expect the project to be finished? Fundraising that stretches on and on is rarely successful. There has to be a clear plan, process, and timeline.

And, finally, remember that cultivation and stewardship should be woven into every part of your fundraising. As gifts are received, immediately implement the donor recognition and thanking policies agreed upon during the planning phase. It is not enough to simply acknowledge a donor once the project is complete. If this campaign lasts more than a few months, consider brief updates to donors who give major amounts.

Follow-up

The campaign is over, you've reached your goal and the special project has been fully funded. There are a few additional steps each organization must follow to ensure the complete success of this campaign as well as lay the groundwork for positive donor responses should another project arise.

1. Committee assessment – assess your fundraising efforts. What worked? What didn't? Document detailed suggestions for improvements.

2. Donor follow-up – Donors, especially those who give the larger, initial, significant gifts, expect a high degree of accountability for the projects they help fund. It's not just enough to issue a tax receipt. Make sure donors receive regular reports showing not just what their money was spent on, but also what was accomplished

and the good it is doing. This is one of the best ways to ensure your next project will be of interest to them.

For detailed assistance regarding guidance on planning, fundraising strategy selection, and implementation, remember to contact Philanthropic Service for Institutions.